

Casualty

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Casualty

by [dracoqueen22](#)

Summary

Peace has a nasty habit of bringing hidden issues to the forefront, and when it finally catches up to Megatron, Ratchet makes a terrible choice that might spell the end of their relationship.

Notes

This is a commission for Borath who presented me with a very interesting premise and a way to explore the trust between Ratchet and Megatron, as well as the various layers of their relationship. Morality and Ethics and Trust and Consent issues lie within. Please enjoy!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter One

He's floating.

It's an altogether unique sensation.

Megatron has felt himself falling. He's caught himself on his own wings, on thrusters, on anti-gravs. He's ridden transports and taken to the sky like a Seeker, though perhaps not with the same skill.

Floating, while being grounded, is a unique sensation.

He's bound. He can, distantly, feel the grip of the padded cuffs around his wrists, keeping his arms taut above his head. He's aware of similar structures around his ankles, attached to a strong bar, keeping his legs spread and his thighs open, bared to the delicious torment Ratchet offers him.

It's not pain. Not this time. It's pleasure, over and over again, with mouth and fingers and toys, until Megatron's soaked the berth beneath his aft with his own lubricant, and his entire frame trembles, hanging on a precipice of never-ending pleasure.

He overloads again. He doesn't know how many that is. He's lost count.

Ratchet's voice keeps him tethered to solid ground, while the rest of him floats, and there's not a tense cable in his frame. Everything is liquid pleasure, and his processor is blissfully blank.

"You're doing so well," Ratchet says, and there is a part of Megatron which would have once quailed at encouragement, would have roared at the idea of needing such weakness.

Right now, it sends another blossom of heat through Megatron's frame. He leans his head into Ratchet's hand, nuzzling his palm, smelling his own lubricant and beneath it, the sharp tang of the antiseptic always clinging to Ratchet's armor.

The vibration of some toy hums away on his array, and Megatron's valve twitches and flexes hungrily, as if he hasn't overloaded multiple times already. He's burning hot, swollen and tender, and still his engine revs and his frame cycles closer to another apex. The buzzing teases his housing, the plump pleats of his valve, the tender plates of his inner thighs, but avoids his anterior node, coming close but not close enough.

And then it's gone, and Ratchet kisses him, achingly slow and gentle, like he wants to savor the taste of him. Megatron moans into the kiss, limp in his bonds, relying on their support to keep him from floating away.

"Still green?" Ratchet murmurs, his hands sweeping Megatron's armor, leaving tingling curls of static charge in his wake, which slide into his seams, nip at his substructure, make him arch and sigh in Ratchet's talented hold.

Megatron tries to remember language.

"Megatron?"

He surfaces a little, manages to make optic contact. "Green," he confirms, slurring the syllables, a steady throb pulsing through his entire frame, the scent of overload ripe in the air, and arousal thick in his system.

Ratchet laughs, but it's quiet and fond, rather than taunting. "I think we finally found it," he says, and he cups Megatron's face while his other hand vanishes.

Megatron finds it a half-moment later, when a delicate brush to his swollen anterior node makes him whimper. He rocks his hips, best he can in his bindings, and his valve cycles down on nothing, aching for a firmer touch.

Found what? Megatron would ask, but the question isn't important, not while Ratchet applies a steady, perfect pressure to his array. When he's drawing charge with his fingertips and painting ecstasy over Megatron's valve.

"One more," Ratchet says, his thumb rubbing a firm pressure while his fingers curve inward, stroking the hard knot of nodes behind Megatron's valve rim. "I know you've got it in you."

Megatron's head lolls, but Ratchet holds him gently, encourages their gazes to meet. He's locked in Ratchet's intense stare, an indescribable emotion behind it, one reminding him that all he has to do is say 'stop' and Ratchet will. He's safe here. Safe enough to let go.

So he does.

The overload comes in waves, each building upon the last, starting in his spark and radiating outward. He shakes, charge spilling out from under his armor, cascading over his plating, and his vision fritzes with static. His vents rattle, his engine roars, but Megatron himself doesn't make a sound, it's swallowed by the ecstasy.

He's floating, still attached by the tether, as distant as it is. As much a part of his frame as he is apart from it.

Sound is distant. He tries to focus on it. Ratchet's talking to him, murmuring words of encouragement, fingers stroking, easing Megatron through the last of the tremors. He feels stripped, lazy in the midst of a pleasure fugue, and his engine no longer roars, but purrs contentedly.

Ratchet grins at him. "Yep. That's it right there," he says as he sweeps his hands over Megatron's armor and presses a kiss to his forehead. "You just lay there and soak it in. I've got the rest."

Megatron believes him.

He drifts, and Ratchet guides him home.

~

Ratchet recharges a lot deeper than he used to, now that there's not a war to keep him running a subconscious alertness protocol. There are other medics on call. He doesn't have to worry about war-time emergencies. He can rest the way he should.

But there are some things that will only adjust with time, and it's not been so long he can ignore signs of distress. He feels it in his field first, a repulsive burst of terror and panic, and he stirs from the fugue of recharge. His optics flicker open, his sensors flash outward in a wide arc, and he's rolling to get to his feet before he's entirely sure what's going on.

Reaction time is all that saves him from a flailing arm, which would have surely broken his nasal ridge, if he hadn't moved off the berth in time. That's the danger of recharging next to a mech larger and stronger.

A mech who's apparently suffering from a nightmare.

Spark pounding, Ratchet cycles a brief ventilation to clear his mind.

"Megatron!" he barks, using a tone that's made many a medic or soldier snap to attention. "Wake up!"

Nothing.

Megatron twitches on the berth. His optics are shuttered, his armor is clamped tightly, and he's radiating heat as though he's become a furnace when Ratchet wasn't looking. His hands form tight fists, his limbs jerking about.

His field.

His field is the worst.

Nausea roils Ratchet's tanks as a miasma of fear and terror and sheer panic rampage across his sensors before he locks away his field. He braces himself and touches Megatron's arm, ready to duck and cover if he needs to do so.

Megatron doesn't strike at him. His armor jitters under Ratchet's palm, flushing a furious heat. His engine climbs toward a terrifying pitch.

Frag.

"Megatron!" Ratchet snaps and grabs Megatron's face with his other hand. Usually a touch is enough to wake Megatron. Some things are never unlearned, especially if one is a former warlord with a host of terrible memories.

Megatron's optics unshutter, the light behind them dimly flickering, but there's no conscious reply to Ratchet's voice. He's not online.

Ratchet mutters a curse and fumbles with the nearest medical port as Megatron abruptly thrashes on the berth, like he's fighting an imagined foe, before he goes scarily still. A quiet whine spills out of his intake, and at the moment, Ratchet can't tell if it's his engine or his vocalizer.

He plugs into Megatron's port, and winces as interference screeches back at him. There's a cascade of failures shouting at him, and Ratchet wades through them, trying to gain access to Megatron's active systems.

Firewalls slam into place, denying him. Aggressive defenders pour out of the shadowy corners,

crowd his presence back, back, back, pushing him out like he's not a medic with the highest-ranked overrides.

Megatron flails again, and Ratchet's yanked free as Megatron twists away from him, arm lashing out. Damn it.

He's out of choices.

Ratchet fumbles out his emergency medkit and hurriedly digs through it, pulling out the strongest sedative they have. He's used it on Optimus before. It'll definitely work on Megatron.

There's a reason medics are built for bulk. He ducks another wild swing, grabs Megatron's arm, and plunges the sedative into his carpal port. Megatron jerks, tries to pull away, but Ratchet holds tightly, praying the upload takes.

It does.

Second by worrisome second, Megatron gradually goes limp beneath him. He sinks into the berth, and the wild frenzy of his field peters off into a whimper. His frame still twitches, but the violence is leashed.

For now.

Ratchet swallows thickly and plugs back into Megatron's cephalic medical port, bracing himself for what he's going to find.

A firewall throws itself up, but Ratchet's prepared this time. He slices through it with the ease of a medic who's old and cranky and has nearly seen it all. The defenses here reek of Shockwave, reek of a mech experimenting with things he shouldn't, and Ratchet knows Shockwave has helped Megatron rebuild himself in the past.

Who knows what little traps he left behind.

Ratchet's cautious. He goes the long way around, tries to stealth into Megatron's processor, see if he can't diagnose the reason Megatron seems to be stuck in recharge, or worse, trapped in a memory purge.

He can't get through. It's like peering through metal mesh, where he can see the problem, but can't reach it. Not with the means currently at his disposal. He's rebuffed at every turn, and exhausts himself trying, until the defense mechanisms battering at his sense of self overpower him, and Ratchet is thrust out of Megatron's systems.

Ratchet shuts his optics and cycles a ventilation. He goes through his options, dismissing them one by one, until he's left with very few, all of them far from ideal. He can't wake Megatron on his own. Not through a medical port. His defenses are too strong.

He's seen this before, albeit in a much weaker form. It's essentially a feedback loop, and where Megatron's coding should be kicking him out of recharge, a glitch is passing over the switch and keeping him trapped in a repeated dream-state, reliving his memories over and over again. Or in this case, nightmares, judging by Megatron's physical reactions.

It shouldn't be a hard fix.

Damn Shockwave.

Damn whatever his experimental programming has done to build the walls Ratchet can't traverse. He has to find a way around them. Under them. To bypass them. But he can't do it here.

"I'm sorry," Ratchet murmurs, stroking the back of his hand over Megatron's face, where the heat of his frame is a dangerous level. He needs monitoring, more than what Ratchet can do in his own quarters.

Ratchet's going to need help, which means revealing Megatron's condition to others, something he knows Megatron loathes. Ratchet doesn't see where he has any other choice. He can't leave Megatron like this. It's a fate worse than death.

Ratchet sighs.

He pings Ultra Magnus for lifting assistance getting Megatron to the medical bay. First Aid is on duty right now, and perhaps together they can find a way to help Megatron.

Because Ratchet fears the only option they have, is one Megatron would not accept.

~

First Aid dreads quiet nights in the Lost Light's medical bay. Not because he despises peace and quiet, but because quiet nights are inevitably disturbed by great and terrible events.

This night is no exception.

He's halfway to dozing, stylus hovering over a datapad where he's been re-drafting his thesis on the spark-restart technique he developed, when the chime to the bay levitates him out of his chair, and Ratchet comes rushing in, with Ultra Magnus on his heels, Megatron in his arms.

"Is the IC berth still free?" Ratchet asks.

"Yes, of course," First Aid says, fumbling to stow his datapad as Ratchet doesn't miss a pace, moving past him for their single intensive care room.

A passive scan provides little answers. Megatron is sedated, First Aid can tell this much, and the leaks of his energy field indicate a mech in distress. But he's not visibly wounded.

"What's going on?" First Aid asks from the doorway as Ultra Magnus sets Megatron in the berth, and Ratchet wheels diagnostic equipment closer, hands steady as he attaches lines and monitors, though his frenetic field suggests he's inwardly panicking.

"I think Megatron is trapped in a purge loop," Ratchet says, and his tone is a clinical, distant one, as if he's already separated Megatron-his-lover from Megatron-the-patient. "I tried to access his systems through a medical port and a firewall prevented me from doing so."

Primus.

If Ratchet can't get through, what hope does anyone else have? A purge-loop is no minor issue either. Megatron will have to remain constantly sedated or the stress on his systems will start to cause a cascade of failures, which First Aid is certain Megatron's frame can't endure.

"What can I do?" First Aid asks, entering the room and rolling up his figurative sleeves. "Do you want me to see if I can access it? Maybe the firewall is coded to reject you specifically." It wouldn't be the first time, after all. There's a risk to being known as the Autobots' preeminent medic.

Ratchet is too famous for his own good sometimes.

"You're welcome to try," Ratchet says, and he hasn't looked up at First Aid once, all of his focus bent upon Megatron.

He tries to pretend that their relationship is nothing serious. That he's not fallen for the murderous Decepticon warlord.

Ratchet's not half as good as lying to everyone else, as he is at lying to himself.

It only takes a few minutes for First Aid to be proven wrong. The defense protocols reject him so quickly, a small ache takes up residence at the base of his head.

"It was worth a try," Ratchet sighs.

"What are our options now?" Ultra Magnus asks. He's taken up post in the doorway, out of the way, but quietly watching their every movement. It's hard to tell if he's concerned for their safety or Megatron's or a bit of both.

"Mneumosurgery," First Aid says.

Ratchet rubs his forehead and sinks down into the nearest chair, looking old and tired. "I knew you'd say that."

"There's nothing else?" Ultra Magnus asks.

First Aid folds his arms over his chassis. "That depends on your definition of else. I'd have to ask Chromedome. He might know of a way that doesn't involve mneumosurgery." First Aid sincerely hopes he does, not just for Megatron's sake, but for Chromedome's as well.

Rewind is not going to like this at all.

~

Ratchet needs only a few moments of reading Chromedome's field to know the answer he has is the one Ratchet feared.

"You're right, Ratchet," Chromedome says once he's finished reviewing the data Ratchet provides him. "It's a purge-loop and glitch. An easy fix for mneuosurgery but..."

"But not ideal," Ratchet finishes for him. He folds his arms and stares through the two-way glass at Megatron's sedated frame. They're outside the room, outside the noisy beep and hum of the many machines maintaining Megatron's comfort as best they can.

"That's it? As smart as everyone here is, that's the only option we have?" Rodimus asks. He'd been roused from recharge by Ultra Magnus, and while that had annoyed Ratchet at first, he understands the political and legal implications of what's transpiring.

Honestly, at this point, he doesn't know which is going to make Megatron angriest.

Chromedome taps one elegant finger on the datapad's edge. "We could wait for him to come out of it on his own. It's happened before, in rare instances."

"And if he doesn't?" Rodimus asks with a deep frown that almost speaks of concern for Megatron. They've all come a long, long way.

"Then he'll be trapped in the purge until either his spark gives out, or his brain shuts down out of sheer self-preservation. Our minds can only take so much," Chromedome answers quietly.

Ultra Magnus' brow darkens. "From repeating a memory?"

Chromedome shakes his head. "It's not just a memory, sir. Loops like this? They're triggered by intensely traumatic memories, the sort to cause lingering emotional pain." His fingers twitch, biolights flickering. "Whatever trapped Megatron, it's the worst of his past, over and over, as if he's experiencing it for the first time."

Ratchet flinches, guilt and worry tangling into a fine knot around his spark. He already knows the science behind this, but hearing it aloud cements the concern. It's a visceral reminder of the danger choking Megatron.

"It's putting stress and strain on his frame," First Aid says, and he starts to pace, as though imagining himself in the predicament and unable to swallow it. "Every loop will chip away at his systems until..."

"He dies," Rodimus finishes, and he frowns.

Chromedome nods, and First Aid echoes him. "Or you'll have to reformat his processor to clear the glitch, in which case, Megatron as everyone knew him, as he knows himself, will be gone."

"Either way, it's death," Ratchet murmurs. His armor clamps tightly to his frame, betraying his inner turmoil, but he can't be averted to conceal it right now. The enormity of the situation weighs heavily on his shoulders.

He blames himself. He should have looked harder. All that time he's spent repairing Megatron, and he never thought to run a simple coding diagnostic. It's standard procedure for Autobots. Why hadn't it occurred to him?

A hand rests on his shoulder. "You wouldn't have found it anyway," First Aid murmurs, as if reading Ratchet's thoughts and following them to the inevitable conclusion. "This is a trauma-induced glitch, not a physical one."

"That's not a comfort," Ratchet mutters.

"Megatron would not consent to pneurosurgery. Not even to save his own life," Ultra Magnus says, speaking what they all know to be true. "And unfortunately, he is not in a condition to make a choice about his own medical care."

Rodimus scrubs at his forehead, looking physically pained. "Yeah, but we were also tasked with making sure Megatron stays alive long enough to face justice. I don't think letting a night purge kill him qualifies as keeping an optic on him."

"But is it ethical to potentially go against his wishes for the sake of a judicial proceeding? Has he lost all rights?" Ultra Magnus argues.

"Why are you asking me these questions? You do know I'm not actually Optimus Prime, right? I don't know this slag," Rodimus counters with a glare.

Ratchet stares through the window, his internal battle echoing Rodimus and Ultra Magnus'. He's taken oaths, as a medic, to preserve life when at all possible, to heal anyone regardless of their nature, to save as many sparks as he is capable. But he is also bound to respect the wishes of a patient, even if those wishes are in conflict with proper medical care, so long as the patient themselves is in a state of mind to coherently make those choices.

He can't stand here and watch Megatron die. If there is anything they can do to save him, Ratchet wants to try. Megatron lays there, suffering, and they expect Ratchet to sit by and watch. They expect him to nod and let him wither away, trapped in some nightmare, a nightmare Ratchet can't even begin to fathom considering Megatron's history, when there's a simpler solution.

Megatron will be furious.

But he'll be *alive*.

If Ratchet has to choose between a happy, dead Megatron and a furious, living one, he's almost ashamed of himself for picking the latter. For his spark, leaning toward saving Megatron, one who had been such a scourge to the safety of those Ratchet cared for.

Ratchet cycles a ventilation.

Primus forgive him.

"Chromedome," he says, and it's a miracle he cuts through the raised voices behind him, Ultra Magnus firm and determined, Rodimus exasperated, First Aid logical. "Can you do this?" He pauses to turn and face the other mech and corrects himself. "Will you do this?"

Chromedome leans forward, elbows braced on his knees, long fingers tangled together. He unfolds them, tips of one touching the fingertips of the other, rubbing over where the needles emerge.

"I can," he says, into the heavy silence. His shoulders sink, the light behind his visor flattening, as though he can feel the disapproving stare of Rewind behind him, despite his conjunx being in their quarters. "I will."

"There. Problem solved," Rodimus says, throwing his hands into the air. "Ratchet's the chief medic so if you ask me, he's the best one to decide."

Ultra Magnus' glare of disapproval is searing in its intensity. "Then I would like to lodge a formal complaint, sir," he says. "I would have it known that the prisoner's wishes are not being met."

Rodimus rubs his forehead and groans in a long, dull note. "Fine, fine. Formal complaint noted. I'm sure you're going to send me a heavy datapad with it." He waves one hand. "Ratchet, Chromedome, don't let Megatron die. Ultra Magnus--"

"I will remain here," Ultra Magnus says, as stiff as a board, and his tone flat to match. He radiates disapproval, and guilt lodges at the back of Ratchet's intake.

He's not changing his mind.

Chromedome stands, and he's the one who approaches Ratchet, his gaze inscrutable, but something lurking behind it. "I'll save him," is what he says, loitering by the doorway, one hand raised like he means to pat Ratchet on the shoulder but thinks twice about it.

He vanishes into the room.

Ultra Magnus takes the chair Chromedome abandoned. It creaks a complaint beneath him, but holds his weight. Rodimus looks at them all before he throws his hands up again and stomps away, muttering subvocally.

First Aid cycles an audible ventilation. "I hope we're doing the right thing," he says, and goes into Megatron's medroom to assist.

Ratchet lingers outside the window, watching from the outside, holding himself as still as a statue to keep the clatter from his armor. It's an easy fix, he reminds himself. Chromedome is very good at what he does.

Rewind will eventually forgive him. Ratchet will gladly take the blame. He'll take a lot of things, if it means Megatron survives.

And if that isn't an epiphany he wasn't prepared to have.

~

It's like surfacing from a mine collapse, clawing his way out through layers of rubble and darkness, for a glimpse of the stars above. His thoughts are peppered with determination, and each vent is labored.

He manages it, however, and when he online, it's with a sudden gasp, a wince as dim lights streak across his optics, the sharp scent of antiseptic burning his sensors. His vision is blurry, and it takes a moment for his sight to clarify.

He's not in Ratchet's habsuite. His memories are hazy, but he last recalls being in berth with Ratchet, after a particularly pleasurable session. He's in the medical bay, that much Megatron can discern, which doesn't bode well for him.

What happened?

Machines beep and hum. There's another rhythmic sound to match -- vents. He's not alone. Megatron turns his head slowly, wincing at a sharp ache at the base of it. Everything feels slow, muted, and he knows he's been sedated. He's familiar with the sensation.

The simmering anxiety at the back of his processor, however, that's new. He feels jittery. Uneasy. He's not sure why.

Ratchet comes into view, slumped into a chair, head tipped forward, as if in recharge. Lines of fatigue crease his face. His biolights are dim. His field is beyond Megatron's senses, whether because everything feels dull to him, or Ratchet's shielding it even in recharge, he doesn't know either.

He doesn't know a lot of things. The unease grows.

Ratchet stirs. His optics flicker. He sits up, finding Megatron on the berth, and an expression flickers over his face before it's gone again. "Welcome back," he says.

"Did I go somewhere?" Megatron asks, and his vocalizer is raspy, as if from disuse. It's like clawing through the mines, but he shifts on the berth, his frame weak and trembling. "What happened?"

Ratchet stands and looks at the readout on one of the monitors. "You suffered a processor glitch during recharge. It trapped you in a memory purge. Do you remember?"

Megatron shutters his optics. It's hazy. His last clear memory is Ratchet and their session. The rest are foggy images. Emotions. Fear, prevalent over all else. It still simmers in his lines, lingers in his spark.

"No," Megatron says.

Some of the tension in Ratchet eases, but it's so minute Megatron almost missed it. "Good," Ratchet says. "That's good."

"Is it?" Megatron pulls himself upright, and his vision sways from the effort. He's as weak as a newspark, and it's disconcerting. "I feel like I'm missing something." He stares at Ratchet, and the medic's face is inscrutable.

Disquiet nestles firmly in his tanks, taking root.

"Is it beyond fixing?" Megatron asks.

Ratchet shakes his head. "No. We managed to pull you out of the loop and fix the glitch." He pauses, hesitates. Megatron wants to grab him, shake him, demand to know whatever it is Ratchet's holding back. "How do you feel?"

"Tired," Megatron says, his tone flat. He's tired of these games. "What is it? If you have bad news, spit it out already."

"You're repaired," Ratchet repeats, and he doesn't sound triumphant. He paces across the room, changes his mind and returns, dropping down into the chair. "It's the how you won't like."

Megatron's optics narrow. He looks down at himself, but his frame is as he remembers. He can move, albeit sluggishly, and his spark and mind feel as his own. As best he can remember. He works his jaw, and his hands pull into fists. Shaking ones. The unease has a name, and it's whatever secret Ratchet carries.

"What did you do?" Megatron demands.

Ratchet works his jaw. "Whatever Shockwave did to you, it significantly increased your internal defenses. I tried to pull you out of the loop on my own, but your firewalls were beyond my abilities. I didn't have any other options." He pauses, cycles a ventilation. "I had to ask Chromedome to hack your processor to remove the glitch."

Megatron goes still. Cold. His vision tunnels. Ratchet keeps talking, but the words are dull, unintelligible.

Mneumosurgery.

They used mneumosurgery.

He reaches up, touches the back of his neck, swears he can feel the ghostly imprint of needles sliding into him, invading him, changing him.

His tank clenches. Purge rises up in his intake, and he forces it down, until it burns and seethes in his chest.

"Mega--"

"Where," Megatron grinds out, through gritted denta, anger and outrage and betrayal tangling into a twisted knot inside of him, as he looks at Ratchet, and no longer sees his lover, but the Autobot crest on Ratchet's chassis, "in my history do you ever think I would have consented to that?"

Ratchet squares his shoulders. "You would have died without it."

"Then you should have let me!" Megatron snarls, and his fist hits the berth before he realizes what he's doing, machines shrieking and beeping around him. He tries to swing his legs around the berth, covers twisted around them. "You had no right to do that. None!"

"You need to stay in the berth. You haven't recovered completely yet," Ratchet says, and he moves in to touch, but Megatron snarls at him. Bears his denta. Roars his engine. He's weak and shaking, but his armor flares, and he'll fight if he has to. Like cornered prey.

Wisely, Ratchet steps back, and guilt rises up in his optics, but Megatron doesn't care about his guilt. Or his reasoning.

"Get out," Megatron growls.

Ratchet's lips press together. His face has gone blank, schooled, like he's just another medic with a recalcitrant patient, and not Megatron's lover who has taken Megatron's trust and used it against him. Betrayed him.

Violated him.

"Get the frag out!" Megatron roars and he doesn't care who hears them, who might be watching, if security runs in here because they think Megatron is violent and needs to be caged.

Ratchet lifts his chin. "If you need anything, let us know," he says, and then he walks out the door, which closes with a quiet hiss behind him.

There's a thin, whining sound in the room. Too late does Megatron realize it's his own frame, his fans spinning rapidly, matching the frantic nature of his vents, the throbbing of his spark, the shaking of his armor. He's hot and cold, clenching the berth so tightly his knuckles ache.

He only has himself to blame.

He should have known better than to trust Autobots. To let them in. To allow them close. To put himself in their hands. He should have never taken up with Ratchet, trusted him, made a place for Ratchet in his spark.

Surrendered his control to such a mech.

His tank clenches.

Megatron leans over the side of the berth and purges, emptying his tank as waves and waves of sick roll over his frame. He purges until there's nothing left, until all he can do is dry-heave, his tank clenching painfully. An automatic drone emerges from a panel in the wall, cleaning up his sick, wiping away the Autobots' mess.

Megatron rolls over and tries to swing his legs over the berth on the other side of the mess. His feet hit the floor, but the moment he tries to leverage himself off the berth, his knees buckle and he crashes back down onto the berth. He's weak. Helpless. Shaky.

He mutters a curse and slinks back onto the berth. It's not as though he has anywhere to go. He's trapped on the Lost Light, surrounded by Autobots. He touches the back of his neck again, fingers tracing where he's sure the needle pierced his tender plating.

The shadows shift. He's not alone.

"Did Ratchet lie?" Megatron asks.

"No." Ravage shifts out of the shadows, sitting back on his haunches, giving Megatron an even look. "I saw the data. You were trapped in a recharge purge. Soundwave could have gotten you out but..." He trails off, leaves the implication hanging.

Yes, Megatron is well-aware of how he's betrayed Soundwave.

He presses his lips together. He grinds his denta. His hands ache as he grips the berth, because it's all he can do. There's nothing to destroy, and no one to rage at.

"It was brief, if that helps," Ravage says, and he speaks gently, like Megatron is something to be handled with care. "Though I'm no expert. They discussed helping you, not changing you."

Megatron grunts. He sinks back in the berth, unable to calm the clattering in his armor. "It doesn't help."

"They didn't kill you," Ravage points out.

"I would have rathered they let me die."

Ravage tilts his head. "And if you'd died you wouldn't be able to do whatever it is you have planned."

Megatron snarls. "Does this look like I have a plan?" he demands, his hand whipping through the air, and dislodging one of the diagnostic lines plugged into him. There's a brief stab of pain, but Megatron barely notices.

Ravage stands, pacing around to the other side of the room, staring up at the monitoring equipment, as unruffled as his master would be. "You always have a plan, whether or not you admit it. I'm quite sure this time isn't any different."

Megatron shuts his optics and cycles a ventilation, trying to get himself under control. The anger burns beneath his armor, itching to be set free. He wants to rage, to hurt something, to react to the emotions broiling inside him.

There's nothing to destroy, thanks to the Autobot badge on his chest.

When he looks back toward Ravage, the cassette icon is gone.

~

The medical rooms are not soundproof.

While Ultra Magnus remains seated and doesn't look through the window, to afford Megatron some privacy, the yelling comes through the walls without muffling. He is able to discern every shouted word and is therefore not surprised when Ratchet eventually exits, his expression one of storm and guilt.

"Don't," Ratchet says when he catches Ultra Magnus looking at him. "I already know what you're going to say."

Ultra Magnus lifts his chin. "Do you."

Ratchet scowls, armor ruffling, like he's trying to regain his dignity and his poise from wherever he left it, perhaps on the floor of Megatron's recovery room. "He's alive. That's what's important."

"Is it." Ultra Magnus intentionally doesn't frame his response as a question. Ratchet is trying to convince himself, more than Ultra Magnus, who has already firmed his mind on the matter.

Ratchet's scowl deepens. "I'm not looking for approval. Or forgiveness. I did what I had to do." He pushes away from the door. "See if you can get him to drink some energon. I doubt he'll accept it from me."

"No, I imagine he wouldn't," Ultra Magnus replies, but whether or not Ratchet hears him in his haste to escape, he isn't sure.

He retrieves a cube of energon -- Ratchet hadn't specified as to the grade so Ultra Magnus grabs one of each mid-grade and medical-grade -- and returns to Megatron's recovery room. Through the window, Megatron has shifted on the berth. He's staring into the distance, a dark cast to his face.

Ultra Magnus cycles a ventilation and opens the door, though he hovers in the doorway. "I've brought energon," he says. "May I come in?"

"I fail to see how my permission matters either way," Megatron says, and there's anger in his voice, dark and reedy.

Ultra Magnus doesn't enter. "I apologize for your treatment. Your wishes should have been met. And if you'd like to lodge a formal complaint and press charges, I will accommodate that for you."

Only then does Megatron look at him, not with surprise or appreciation, but a guarded respect. "If I had any faith in Autobot justice, I'd do just that. But I don't." He frowns and makes a faint gesture. "Bring me the energon."

Ultra Magnus steps out of the doorway, letting it shut behind him. "If there's anything else I can do, feel free to ask."

"Is that right?" Megatron takes both cubes of energon, giving them a suspicious sniff before he sets both aside.

"Yes." Ultra Magnus eyes the empty chair beside the berth, but it's not been offered to him, and he won't presume. "While Ratchet was given the final say in regards to your care, it did not escape notice that you would desire otherwise. I feel you are owed anything I can supply."

Megatron gives him a long, level look. "Then you can leave me alone."

"Fair enough." Ultra Magnus certainly can't blame him. He tilts his head in a half-bow. "You know how to contact me should you require anything."

He takes his leave. It's the least he can do.

~

The medical rooms aren't soundproof, but if there's ever a chance to renovate the Lost Light, it might be something First Aid suggests they add. It's one thing to suffer the sounds of patients in agony.

It's another to listen to your superior officer and his ex-Decepticon lover have a bit of a domestic while you are two rooms over, trying not to overhear them and failing miserably.

It's quick, but brutal, and First Aid tries to make himself look busy as Ratchet first snaps at Ultra Magnus, then comes storming into the medbay proper like he has a shaft stuck sideways up his aft. He has a look like he wants someone to blame other than the face he sees in the mirror, and whoever frags him off first is going to be the recipient of an angry artillery.

“I’m transferring Megatron’s care to you,” Ratchet says, as though it isn’t obvious such a thing is going to happen anyway. “I have little doubt he doesn’t want to see me, but he still needs monitoring for the next couple of days.”

First Aid nods, like the obedient subordinate he is, but not so obedient he can’t call out Ratchet when Ratchet deserves it. Like now. “Do you still think you made the right call?”

Ratchet gives him a sharp look. “We’re medics. It’s our duty to save our patients.”

First Aid hums a non-committal noise. “And if you were making that decision as his medic and not his lover, maybe I’d be inclined to agree.” He pretends to be busy reorganizing the top of the desk, making perfect right angles of his datapads and his styluses. “We don’t always know what’s best.”

Medics have to be arrogant, to a certain degree. They have to be confident. They have to be sure. Medics who constantly second-guess their diagnoses and treatment options don’t survive to be medics very long. Primus knows, Ratchet carries arrogance like a mantle, and to a certain extent, it’s warranted.

He’s apparently drawing on it now.

“Saving a patient’s life is always the best choice,” Ratchet snaps, as if First Aid had suggested taking Megatron out back and giving him a quick execution. Which, to be fair, is probably what a great many mechs would have suggested, only for an entirely different reason than the matter at hand.

First Aid lifts his gaze, meets his mentor optics straightforward. “Are you convincing me or yourself?”

Ratchet’s optics narrow, but then he straightens and taps his audial, activating his comm on a frequency First Aid can’t hear. He’s too polite to hack it either, though it’s well within his capabilities. The war has taught him a great many things he never knew he needed.

He vents a sigh, and his shoulders sag. An expression flickers across his face -- resignation -- and Ratchet drops his hand from his comm.

“Something I need to know?” First Aid asks.

“It should make you feel better that I’ve received a formal reprimand. Again,” Ratchet says with a grunt and a sour tone. “As if Megatron chastising me isn’t enough, Ultra Magnus has decided he needs to get involved, too.”

First Aid debates how he wants to reply before settling on, “To be fair, Megatron does have the right to file charges, if he wants. You knew his wishes. You chose to act against them.”

Ratchet’s jaw sets. He puffs back up, returning that mantle of arrogance to his shoulders. “I chose to save his life. I’m still confused why that’s the wrong choice to make.” He spins around and stomps out of the medical bay with all the outrage he can muster.

First Aid sighs and goes back to work.

It’s a fragging mess full of gray areas, and he’s not surprised Megatron is at the root of it. Things are always complicated when it comes to the former warlord.

And it doesn't look like that is ever going to change.

Chapter 2

Megatron doesn't know what's in the fluids attached to his lines. Energon, he assumes, and possibly a sedative of some kind, because time slips away from him a bit.

He's in recharge, and he's not. He can't recharge for longer than a few hours of time, and he wakes up from the bursts of sleep with nightmares shaking his frame, making his spark rattle in his chassis.

Some of them he remembers.

Some of them he's glad he can't.

The purges based on actual events are the worst. They are vivid. Visceral. He's trapped in the mines, he's strapped to a table, he's under fire, he's blown to pieces. He lives, and he dies, and he lives again. It's a cycle he can't escape.

He feels helpless in the wake of them, these foes he can't fight with traditional means. There's no one to attack. There's nothing to hurt. There's no weapon he can wield. It's as if a wall has been broken, a dam burst, and everything held behind them rushes out to swallow him, heedless of his own efforts to escape.

It's the mine collapse which haunts him the most.

Safety precautions in the mines had always been spoken but unheeded. Supervisors pretended they wanted the workers to be safe and efficient, but truthfully, they wanted production doubled and output tripled, and they didn't care if their workers died or if the conditions were unsafe. Mines collapsed. Workers died.

They replaced them quickly enough, often within hours. Sometimes, they hauled the corpses away, sometimes they had to look at the empty frame of their fallen brethren until the end of a shift, and could carry the mech out themselves. No one cared about the cold-constructed mechs made to live and die in the dangerous dark.

Megatron isn't sure how long he spent buried in rubble. He remembers the fall of debris knocking him unconscious, rattling his processor. His chronometer hadn't functioned. His GPS had spun and spun, too deep to give him a location. His comms crackled and spat a lack of connection.

He knew they wouldn't find him. He didn't know if they'd bother to look. The section of mine they'd had him digging had been mostly emptied, with Megatron's crew tasked to carve out the last bits of what remained before they were reassigned elsewhere. The tunnel was unstable. They all knew it.

Megatron had argued with their superior. While his fellow miners worked with hollow optics and creaking frames, Megatron had tried to inject logic into a situation where greed ruled.

They punished him.

They sent him to work at the deepest end of the tunnel. The most unstable. It came as no surprise when the tunnel collapsed.

Megatron expected to offline there. What was one more drone lost to them? Especially one so troublesome. They were too far from the surface for anyone to care what happened to those constructed cold. He was created for this purpose. If he died for this purpose, then he died doing what he was made to do.

No one cared. He was a nothing.

His vents clogged with debris and dust. His system ran into a dangerous level of overheating. His biolights flickered, and the silence of the tunnel wrapped around him. Silent save for the frantic whines of his engine, the pulsing of his spark in his audials.

He clawed his way free. He beat at the stones, dug his fingers into the debris, broke struts and limbs and pushed through the pain, because if he was going to die, it would be clawing for freedom, not waiting for help that wouldn't come.

In his nightmares, he doesn't escape. He offlines choking on grit, energon pooling around his damaged frame, alone in the dark, knowing how little he mattered in the cog of the great Cybertronian machine.

Sometimes, he wakes when the cave-in crashes down on his head. Sometimes, he wakes when he starts suffocating on his own frame. Sometimes, it's when his spark snuffs out.

Sometimes, he online's swallowing a scream.

The knowledge of Chromedome's needles on the back of his neck attract other nightmares, other things he doesn't want to remember. The betrayal stings fierce and fresh.

It's clear he won't find any rest in the medical bay.

When First Aid comes into the room a few days after his admission -- and during which he's not seen Ratchet once -- Megatron has swung his legs over the side of the berth. He's disconnected himself from most of the machines and is struggling with the last.

"Those are attached for a reason," First Aid says. He doesn't have a mouth, but his expression gives off the effect of frowning. He clutches a cube of energon.

"I'm discharging myself." Megatron manages to yank the last one free with a grunt, and a shriek of alarm from one of the machines.

First Aid immediately moves to turn it off, shifting them into blessed silence. "I would advise against that," he says, but he doesn't try to intercept Megatron or shove him back toward the dangling lines.

He's a medic with sense, apparently. Perhaps Ratchet should be taking lessons from his apprentice.

"Your advice is noted. I'm not staying here any longer," Megatron says. He rises from the berth, takes a moment to find his balance on unsteady limbs, and makes for the door.

First Aid doesn't try to get in his way. "If you have any questions or need anything, my comms are always open."

He follows Megatron at a polite distance.

“Please rest as much as you can. You’re still recovering,” First Aid says.

“I appreciate the concern,” Megatron lies, and he steps out of the medical bay before First Aid can say anything else. It feels like there is something dark and dangerous nipping at his heels, and unease coils in his tanks, not quite as violently as the day he first woke, but waiting in the wings to strike.

He heads straight for his private hab-suite. He has no intention of interacting with anyone, and as he’s been removed from the duty schedule ‘until further notice’ according to the message in his inbox, he has nothing else to do. He wants to be alone and right now, his habsuite is the only place he can be certain no Autobots will bother him.

Or so he thought.

Megatron keys open his door, and Ratchet looks up at him like a misbehaving newspark caught in the act. Anger flashes hot and fiery through Megatron’s systems, like the aftermath of an artillery sweep.

“Get out,” Megatron growls, his hands forming into fists at his side.

Ratchet picks up a meshcloth and tucks it away. “You should still be in the medical bay,” he says, and the flash of a scan hits Megatron, making his field tingle.

He snarls. “That’s not for you to decide.” Megatron steps out of the doorway so Ratchet has no excuse. He points to the door. “Get the frag out right now.”

Ratchet’s optics narrow. He has the audacity to scowl, as though Megatron is the rude one in this circumstance. “We need to talk.”

“If I talk to you right now, I’m going to hurt you,” Megatron snaps, because it’s growing inside him, threatening to swallow him, the urge to blame someone for his pain, and Ratchet being an easy target. Easier still with part of the fault lying on his shoulders. “I’m trying not to do that right now. So how about you actually listen to me for once and give me some damned space!”

He’s shouting by the end. Enough to draw a crowd. Perhaps even security. Megatron doesn’t care. He’ll ping Ultra Magnus if he has to.

He’s shaking. It alarms him that he’s shaking. He’s not ready for this at all.

Ratchet works his jaw, and he reeks of guilt, but instead of allowing it to define his actions, he pulls on anger instead. He storms across the room, heading for the door.

“You were trapped in your mind,” he says, defensive. “I did what I thought was best.”

Megatron steps in the doorway once Ratchet is beyond it. “You made that choice for you, not me. Don’t even try to pretend otherwise,” he snaps, and slams his hand on the panel, closing the door before Ratchet can reply.

He stands there for a moment, Ratchet’s face echoing in his short-term memory, the taste of

Ratchet's field on the tip of his own. There'd been an urge, however brief, to let himself fall into Ratchet's arms. He'd started to think of them as a place of safety.

He's shaking. His vents have increased to a dangerous rate. He's cold, which is odd to him. The tips of his fingers tingle. There's a sensation of panic at the edge of his spark, but there's no battle before him.

Megatron is unfamiliar with all of this.

He stumbles to his berth, vaguely acknowledging that his habsuite smells as if it's been freshly cleaned and tidied. He collapses onto the new berth cover, sprawls onto the thick padding, and his engine reaches an uncomfortable pitch.

He offlines his optics to quell the rising nausea. His armor clatters. He remembers the dark and the cold. He remembers the helplessness of the mines, and how it felt to be nothing. He remembers the pain.

He has no choice but to remember the pain. He can't chase the memories away. They're there, in his active memory queue.

Megatron works his intake. His mouth is dry.

This has to be Chromedome's fault. Surely the Autobot has done something to him. Rather than repair him, he's decided to torture Megatron by reminding him of his failures, of his worst moments.

He won't call for help. He won't. He hadn't then, he won't now.

He'd rather die.

~

Ratchet doesn't know what to call the emotion churning inside of him. Anger is there. Frustration, too. Guilt circles around the wild tide, herding everything else in his spark. Megatron's words echo in his audials.

Ah, and yes, there's the concern.

Megatron looked exhausted. It wreathed his frame like a secondary layer of armor. Clearly, he hasn't recharged soundly since they pulled him from the purge cycle. And why isn't he still in the medical bay? He should be under observation.

He can't ask Megatron.

Ratchet heads for his own habsuite, but he pings First Aid on the way.

"I already know what you're going to ask, and I'm going to tell you that it's none of your business because he's my patient now," First Aid says, in a sharp tone Ratchet is unaccustomed to hearing from the other medic. "He left by personal request, and I felt we owed it to him to allow whatever

he wanted.”

Ratchet snarls, though First Aid can't see him. “He's a patient. He doesn't know what he needs.”

“That's what you keep telling yourself, I know,” First Aid says, and there's chastisement in his tone, thick enough that Ratchet startles. “Don't tell me how to do my job, Ratchet. I was on Delphi for a long time without you. I know what I'm doing.”

Ratchet halts in the corridor, in front of the big portside windows, where stars rush by, too quick to identify. “Clearly not, if you allowed a mech who recently underwent processor surgery to walk out of your medbay.”

“Your guilt is not my fault,” First Aid snaps, and Ratchet is taken aback by the vehemence in his tone. It rings through the comm. “I know why you chose what you did, but that doesn't excuse you from it. You taught me about a patient's right to choose, how we can't save those who don't want to be saved.”

“This and that are two different situations,” Ratchet retorts.

“No, they're not, and if you don't quit lying to yourself about it, there won't be anything left for you to salvage.” First Aid vents loud enough for it to translate over the comm. “We all know how Megatron would have picked for himself, and you know more than anyone. You opted to save his life for yourself, not for him.”

Ratchet grinds his denta, swearing he can taste sparks on his glossa. “Saving lives is what we do.”

There's a moment of silence, so quiet the connection crackles with it. “Patient care doesn't always mean saving their sparks,” First Aid says after a long, long moment, his voice quiet and aching. “You're the one who told me that.”

It's Ratchet's turn to be silent. The twisting churn of emotion inside of him is as noisy as his conscience, which is starting to sound a lot like First Aid.

“Just take care of him,” Ratchet says, gruff, and ends the comm.

He shuts his optics and cycles a ventilation, trying to get himself under control. It's not often he second-guesses a choice. He hasn't had the luxury of second-guessing in a long time. In war-time, decisions are made in a split-second and living with the consequences an inevitability. He's usually too busy trying to survive, and hold together the soldiers around him, to linger on said consequences and their attached guilt.

Peace leaves too much time for dwelling.

He doesn't know what makes him angrier. That he knows First Aid is right, and technically, Ratchet made the wrong call by all the regulations of a medic's vow. Or that he made the call not because it was best for Megatron, but because Ratchet couldn't stand there and watch Megatron die.

Because he cares.

He hates that he does, but it's there, nestled in a quiet corner of his spark. He cares for Megatron. He cares for a mech responsible for the death of millions.

Ratchet sighs and presses on, back toward his habsuite. His head aches, his spark aches, and there's a bottle of high grade calling his designation.

Unfortunately, it's not his to be had today. Because a dressing down from Ultra Magnus and First Aid are not enough. Now Bluestreak lies in wait outside of his habsuite, and it doesn't take a genius to guess why the sniper is here.

"Don't give me that look," Bluestreak says before Ratchet can so much as open his mouth. He lifts a bottle into view and gives it a wiggle. "I brought a bribe."

Ratchet peers at the label, and well, Bluestreak knows him too well. It's a damn good bribe. "Are you going to leave the bottle when you're done?"

"Yes."

"All right. Come in."

Might as well get this over with.

Ratchet keys them into his habsuite and rummages around in a cabinet. He has something that can serve as a cup, he's sure.

"We can drink out of the bottle, Ratchet. You don't have to be hospitable," Bluestreak says with a chuckle. "It's mostly for you. I don't even expect you to share. It was just a bribe to get me in the door, since we both know how much you hate talking about feelings."

Ratchet snorts. "Just because it comes easy to you--"

"It's not easy," Bluestreak interrupts, but it's so quiet it doesn't feel rude. "But it's necessary. And who else on this ship is going to get where you're coming from? Most of the mechs play in the things we do, but no one is as serious as we are. Except maybe Rung, but I know you're not going to talk to him."

Frag that. Rung sees too much, and talking to Rung feels like he's getting a dressing down from a superior officer or a caretaker or one of his teachers. Ratchet loves Rung, considers Rung one of his best friends, but there is no one who pulls off a disappointed look quite like Rung, and Ratchet would rather hold on to his confidence a little while longer.

Ratchet closes the cabinet, and Bluestreak is there, offering him the bottle, cork already removed. "Did I ever tell you that you're my favorite?" Ratchet accepts it, immediately taking a swig of the thick, syrupy-sweet engex. His one indulgence, this carefully guarded secret.

"You didn't have to. I already knew." Bluestreak smiles, but it turns serious. "Tell me about Megatron."

"Don't you already know?"

"I want to hear it from you."

Ratchet sighs and scrubs at his forehead. He stumbles to his berth, sits on the edge of it, and Bluestreak plops down next to him, attentive.

“He was dying,” Ratchet says, and taps into his clinical side, to try and forget the panic-worry-fear he’d felt when the realization struck him. “I made a choice that saved his life.”

“I think that’s a gross oversimplification.”

Ratchet side-eyes Bluestreak. “That so?”

Bluestreak plucks the engex bottle from his hands and takes a swig, only to make a disgusted face. “Ugh. Don’t know how you drink this.” He hands it back and gives Ratchet a long look. “You saved his life, against what you knew would be his better wishes, because you didn’t want him to die. You wanted him to live, to be with you, for your own sake.”

Is there an echo on this damn ship?

Ratchet frowns and fiddles with the engex bottle, picking at the peeling label with two fine manipulators from his fingertips. “Yeah,” he admits, to Bluestreak alone. “And don’t think I’m unaware of how obscenely stupid and terrible that is.”

“He might not be the best choice of someone to fall in love with, but I don’t think the love itself is terrible,” Bluestreak says. “Up til now, you were good for each other.”

Ratchet snorts.

“Well, it’s true. Maybe it’s because the war is over, or maybe it’s because you found someone you can connect with on a level you haven’t managed with anyone else -- Drift doesn’t count, that’s different, I know it is, so don’t you start,” Bluestreak says before Ratchet can even open his mouth. He’s too perceptive for his own damn good. “But that you can look past what he’s done, to see what he is and what he’s trying to be, that’s not a bad thing.”

Ratchet takes another swig, lets the thick heat of it settle in his tanks. “Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t. Either way, I’m pretty sure it’s over.”

“You had to know he wasn’t going to react well.” Bluestreak makes a thoughtful noise. “Then again, better that he’s alive and hates you, then dead and apart from you, hm?”

Ratchet snorts again.

“Yeah, I figured that.” Bluestreak’s quiet for a moment, but Ratchet knows that means he’s readying his most powerful weapon. “We have a responsibility, Ratchet. If there’s one thing we’re never supposed to do, it’s betray the trust of our submissives. That’s the number one rule. You as good as ignored his safe word.”

And there it is.

Ratchet tightens his grip on the bottle, Bluestreak’s words precision missiles right into the center of the thickest knot of guilt in his chassis. The engex tastes sour on his glossa. Ratchet caps the bottle and stares at the floor.

“You decided you knew what was best for him because yes, you love him and you want him to live, but we both know it wasn’t just that,” Bluestreak continues, because he’s a sniper and he always aims for the tenderest spots. “You’re the Autobot’s best medic. You’re the Dominant in

your sessions. You are the righteous one because he's the defeated Decepticon, the great and terrible Megatron. You can dress it up however you like, but you and I both know, what you did wasn't for him. It was a selfish choice for you."

"Enough," Ratchet says, and he pushes up from the berth, his vents quickening, and an iron grip on his spark, squeezing and squeezing. The bottle creaks in his grip, and he has to set it down before he shatters it.

Such a vintage is rare now. With Cybertron still in ruins -- thanks to Megatron, he mustn't forget that -- it's likely Ratchet will never see it again.

Bluestreak's field is gentle, sympathetic even, as it brushes against Ratchet's. "You owe him an apology. And you probably need to accept that whatever you had is over. I don't know Megatron, but he doesn't seem the type to take betrayal lightly."

"Yes. I know. I'm fragging lucky he hasn't knocked my head off," Ratchet growls. He cycles several ventilations, trying to ease the tightness in his chassis.

"For what it's worth, I'm not so sure I would've chosen different, if I'd been in your position," Bluestreak says, and his voice is warm again. Friendly, too. He rises from the berth, resting a hand on Ratchet's shoulder. "I'm not good at letting go either."

Ratchet snorts and slings an arm over the sniper's shoulder, pulling him into a hug at his side. "Didn't stop you from eviscerating me with logic and sense."

"Well, this and that are two different things." Bluestreak slides around and pulls Ratchet into an embrace. "You know where to find me if you want to talk some more. But as for Megatron, leave him alone. Give him space. Maybe you two can work it out, maybe you can't. That's the choice you made. Don't blame him for it."

Ratchet sighs and allows the embrace. He doesn't blame Megatron at all.

He blames himself.

~

Megatron wakes.

Exhaustion lingers in every line, every strut, every cable. He forces himself out of the berth, forces himself to swallow mid-grade -- not fool's energon, not anymore, and the reminder of another lie makes the midgrade sour on his gossa.

His limbs tremble. He stares at them until they obey his command. He wrests control of himself through sheer willpower.

He has a shift. It's on a trial basis, according to Ultra Magnus, who hadn't wanted Megatron to return to his duties yet, but had conceded when Megatron reminded him that it was choice. Autobots can be predictable if you tap the right guilt complex.

He needs something to feel normal again.

Megatron shows up on the bridge, takes report from Ultra Magnus, and settles into the routine. It should be a quiet shift. They're following one of the vague directions from the information they found on Clandestine, and while most of it hasn't panned out, they've been hopeful.

Megatron knows he's not the only one waiting for some weird and outrageous event to find them. If there's one thing Rodimus and the Lost Light excel at, it's being found by trouble. It's an inevitability.

Focus is slippery. The lights are too bright. The beep and hum of the consoles are too loud, the murmured conversation like a grating aggravation on his sensors. He paces, because he can't stay still, and he focuses on his ventilations.

It's one shift.

He reviews data. He advises an alternate route around a debris cluster. He reads through the reports of what's transpired on the ship in the past week or so, when he was out of commission. He ignores the sideways glances the crew toss his way. No one is foolish enough to ask him a direct question.

Megatron might have gone the entire shift without incident, proud at himself for the mask he cobbled together, if his idiotic crew hadn't decided to play grenade tag in the lower levels again, setting off the alarms. They spring to life in the bridge, flashing orange and yellow, bright and shrill, and Megatron snaps out of his fugue.

His spark surges into overdrive. He whirls toward the console, optics wide, and Jackpot releases a squeak of panic as he fumbles to cut off the alarm.

"Primus," Jackpot says with a laugh that betrays his nervousness. "Hate it when that happens. You think they'd learn, right, sir?" He gives Megatron a lopsided grin.

He's shrunk back against the console. His optics are wide. Probably because Megatron is looming over him. He doesn't remember striding across the bridge. He's not sure when he came within reach of Jackpot, but here it is.

He backs up. He nods. He gathers control of himself, and pretends everything is fine.

"Send security down to take names and issue a reprimand," Megatron says, and his proud of himself for the control in his vocals.

"Already done, sir," says Jackpot.

Megatron nods and steps further back. He retreats all the way to the central console, and on the outside, everything is fine, while inside he's a storming rage of barely concealed emotion.

He tries to unknot his armor, but it clings to his substructure, as if subconsciously he's preparing for battle. The empty socket for his fusion cannon clicks into readiness and honks at him when the weapon isn't found. His spark pounds, distressed without understanding why, and adrenaline pumps through his system at an alarming rate.

There's no battle, but his spark and frame and defensive protocols are convinced otherwise. Every sound heralds a possible attack. Every shift of motion in his peripheral is a threat he must assess.

Surrounded by Autobots, is it any wonder he doesn't feel safe?

When Rodimus arrives, early no less, Megatron hates himself for feeling relieved, for being glad to see the obnoxious younger mech. They've come to an accord, he and Rodimus, but he knows Rodimus resents his presence, as much as Megatron considers him a poor substitute for Optimus.

They're working on it.

"You look like slag," Rodimus says, with a complete lack of tact. "Maybe think about actually taking the rest you're supposed to be getting."

"Nice of you to care," Megatron grunts and hands him the command datapad, not that there's anything to report, save for the tag-grenade idiots, but he thinks Ultra Magnus will be more inclined to deal with those. "I'm fine."

Rodimus arches an orbital ridge. He very pointedly looks Megatron up and down. "You look like you're about to fall over. And I can't believe these words are about to come out of my mouth, but I'm fragging *worried* about you." His frown deepens and he taps his chin. "Try to actually get some rest or something?"

Megatron cycles his optics. Rodimus' words and his tone match. That's genuine concern. It throws him for a loop.

"I'm fine," he lies.

"Yeah. Sure you are." Rodimus logs in to the console, tapping himself on duty. "I'll just take my concern and stuff it then." His spoiler flicks, up and down, and in that moment, he reminds Megatron a lot of Starscream.

The parallels are uncanny.

A host of retorts rise on Megatron's glossa. He voices none of them. He heads back to his habsuite instead, thinking only of collapsing on his berth in deference to the exhaustion plaguing him.

He's handling this on his own. He's fine. He doesn't need Autobot sympathy.

He's fine.

~

"Megatron looked like he was about to fall over. Anything you want to tell me?" Rodimus' comm nudges Ratchet out of his haze of concentration.

He cycles his optics and sits up, rubbing his temples. Ratchet sits back from the broken scanner he's been crouched over for the past three hours.

It's an effective distraction. Both from the circumstances, and from the half-consumed bottle of rare engex Bluestreak left for him.

“You already know what happened,” Ratchet says, acknowledging the comm.

“Yeah, but I assumed that you, being his lover and all, and being a medic, would be taking care of him,” Rodimus says, and though his tone isn’t chastising, there’s an implication in his words.

It’s a humiliating burn. That Rodimus, irresponsible Rodimus, is chastising Ratchet, and it makes sense.

“I will be,” Ratchet says, and rises to wipe his hands and make himself presentable. “Provided he wants me to.”

“Right. Well. You get right on that,” Rodimus says with an air of authority that seems to be coming easier to him these days. Apparently, all he needed was a rival in the form of Megatron to get his gears in, well, gear. “Rodimus, out.”

Ratchet sighs.

He retrieves some energon for Megatron, as both a peace offering and an excuse to visit. He runs through several conversational openers, and is frustrated when none of them seem viable.

Bad luck strikes on his way to Megatron’s habsuite as he passes by Ultra Magnus just as the larger mech is stepping out of his own quarters, only partially distracted by a datapad in hand. He looks up as Ratchet comes close enough for brief field contact, and Ratchet resents just a little how well Ultra Magnus is at schooling his expressions.

“I suppose I will only need one guess as to your destination,” Ultra Magnus rumbles.

Ratchet cycles a ventilation. “If it makes you feel better, Rodimus all but ordered me to.”

“Rodimus does not know how to address the finer details of your relationship, especially how it relates to the current situation.” Ultra Magnus levels him with a look that makes it hard for Ratchet to remember he’s actually Minimus Ambus deep down inside. “Megatron needs time and space. If you give him neither, you will not like the end result.”

“So everyone keeps telling me.” Sheer force of will keeps Ratchet from scowling. “Don’t you worry, Magnus. I’m bringing him energon because he needs it. I’ll even leave it outside the door if he ignores me.”

Ultra Magnus tilts his head. “You will let him go?”

“If he wants me to.” Primus, but he hates talking about his private life with others. He hates even more that his private life has intersected into something necessarily public. “I’ll understand if he wants to dissolve our... relationship.” Yes, that’s him, stumbling over his words like an idiot. “But I’ll still help him if he needs it. If he asks.”

“Hm,” Ultra Magnus says, and a mech like him can make a simple glyph sound like an incredibly lengthy sentence. He dips his head, barely, then says, “Carry on.”

“Glad I could get your permission,” Ratchet drawls. He steps past Ultra Magnus, trying to pull on his dignity from the tatters that remain.

Ultra Magnus lets him go.

Ratchet's certainty lasts for the half-dozen steps it takes for him to round the corridor and arrive at Megatron's hab-suite. He braces himself, unsure how he'll be received, and pings the door.

"I've brought energon," he says, to explain himself. "If you don't want to talk to me, I'll leave it outside the door."

He waits.

He knows Megatron is inside. He'd checked. He's not talking to thin air.

He waits a few minutes more. Silence.

Well. He tried.

Ratchet sets down the energon and turns to go. He only manages a few steps before the door clicks open behind him. Ratchet turns back, stifling a pang of worry as he gets a glimpse of Megatron, who's crouched to pick up the energon.

He looks exhausted, optics dim, armor clamped so tightly, Ratchet wonders if he's properly ventilating. There's weariness in the slump of his shoulders, the tremble of his fingers, and his field keeps slipping from his control, allowing Ratchet samples of his mental state.

It's not good.

Ratchet's first instinct is to draw Megatron into his arms, to soothe the anxiety and pain away, and he closes his hands into fists, tucks them at his side. He can't do those things. He surrendered that privilege.

"You have five minutes," Megatron says, and steps back into his room, leaving the door open.

Well. He'd better not waste the invitation.

"Thank you," Ratchet says, hovering in the doorway. He doesn't feel like an invitation has been extended to fully enter. He cycles a ventilation, all of his carefully rehearsed lines escaping his memory. "How are you?"

"I am not answering that question," Megatron replies with a snort. His habsuite is dim, the lights barely at twenty percent, and the draping shadows are eerie.

Fair enough.

Ratchet works his jaw. He braces himself. No point in pretending there isn't a combiner in the corner. "You're right. I made the wrong decision because I wanted to save you, not because I knew it's what you wanted." He pauses, pushing himself past the urge to hide behind his pride. "I'll apologize for betraying your trust, but I'm not sorry you're not dead. And I'm not sorry you're free of whatever nightmare trapped you."

There. A decent medium.

Megatron stands in the middle of his habsuite, and his stance is defensive. Prepared. Like a mech

about to storm the battlefield. Ratchet aches to see it.

“No. Instead, you’ve trapped me in my own frame,” Megatron says, and the last emerges with a growl.

Oh.

Oh, of course.

Ratchet hasn’t been here, and he doubts Megatron has been willing to listen. No one’s explained to him the aftereffects of treating a purge-loop, or what it would have done to his frame and subconscious. Ratchet recognizes the side-effects, can see them written all over Megatron’s frame, and he can’t imagine what dark memories the experience has brought to life for Megatron now.

He doubts Megatron is equipped to deal with them either.

“You need to talk to First Aid,” Ratchet says with a wince. “I know you don’t want to hear it from me, but he’ll explain it for you. Whatever you’re feeling right now, it’s normal.” He swallows a sigh. “Both as a side-effect of the pneumomectomy, and as lingering echoes of the purge-loop.”

Crimson optics narrow like slits of accusation. “Is that your way of telling me it’s technically not your fault?”

“No. I accept the blame,” Ratchet says. He’s a coward in many things, but not this.

“Well, at least you’re honest about something.” Megatron’s voice is like tires over gravel. He lifts the cube of energon, eyeing it pointedly. “Should I be worried about contaminants? Fool’s energon maybe?”

Ratchet winces.

“I deserved that.”

“And more,” Megatron says, but he flicks open the cap and takes a sip of the cube, his gaze falling away, dismissive. “Your apology is noted. I’ll speak with First Aid.”

But not accepted. He supposes that’s as much as he deserves.

Ratchet inclines his head. He cycles a ventilation. “Thank you.” He shifts his weight, swallowing the urge to yell, to defend himself, to shout all the arguments he’s told himself over and over again. “I’ll leave you be.”

Megatron doesn’t tell him otherwise. Doesn’t protest when Ratchet steps out of the doorway to leave. Doesn’t watch him go.

Well.

Ratchet squares his shoulder. He’s got a little bit of dignity left.

“Thank you for the energon,” Megatron says, and the door shuts behind Ratchet, closing him off from the closest thing he’s had to a relationship in centuries. It could have meant something. Or maybe it’s a pipe dream.

Megatron is, after all, Megatron. And Ratchet is Ratchet. Decepticon and Autobot. Murderer and medic.

Maybe this is for the best.

~

It's mid-grade. It's spiced to his preference. It's been subtly warmed.

Megatron supposes Rodimus is the one to blame for Ratchet's appearance at his door. He can't imagine the medic would have shown up on his own.

The apology was expected. Autobots are good at apologies. As good as they are at guilt. Remorse? Well, that's a different story. Autobots are full of apologies, but they never change.

Who's the fool here?

It must be Megatron.

"Are you done with the Autobot then?"

Megatron startles, his spark leaping into his intake. His armor clatters. The shadows in the dim of the room coalesce into a quadrapedal shape, dim optics brightening.

Ravage tilts his head with a slow-blink. "I apologize. I thought you knew I was here."

"I should have," Megatron says. He toys with the cube, spins it in his fingers, contemplating what it means. Or perhaps, sometimes a cube of energon is just a cube of energon.

Not everything has a second meaning, Rung.

"It's none of your business," Megatron adds, after a moment, which is as much true as the fact Megatron doesn't have an answer to the question. Because he's a fool.

He's been trying to break himself of the habit of lying to himself. So he'll admit, quietly and to himself, why the feelings of betrayal are so sharp and heavy. Because he cares for Ratchet. He has affection for Ratchet. If he knew what love was, Megatron might even claim to feel it for Ratchet.

Betrayal hurts the most when it's wielded by someone you dared trust. Megatron had given Ratchet something he rarely gave anyone, had attempted something with Ratchet he'd never dare attempt with anyone, and he'd known better, but he'd done it anyway. He'd wanted it so much, and he'd thought Ratchet was someone he could trust with it.

Trust, in general, he rarely offered. This trust, specifically, had been given to no one.

This is the thanks he gets. This is how it's treated. He doesn't know if this betrayal is forgivable. Surmountable. He doesn't know if he can forgive.

The anger is too heavy. Sharp and burning in his lines. Eating him from the inside out.

The war began because of stolen choices. Another one has been taken from him now. And it is now, as it had been, by the hands of an Autobot. War or no war.

“Do you want my opinion?” Ravage asks, with an even tone Megatron envies.

“You’re going to offer it anyway.” Megatron sighs and sets the energon down, half-consumed as it is. He’s suddenly lost what little appetite he had.

Ravage offers a toothy smirk. “About this plan you don’t have.”

“I’m listening.”

“Imagine how much there is to gain knowing you effectively have the CMO of the Autobots wrapped around your finger.” Ravage rises to pace across the floor in front of him, slow and measured, like stalking prey. “Knowing that when you reach the end, you’ll have him arguing for you, and Ultra Magnus also, the honorable idiot.”

Megatron frowns. “His honor doesn’t make him an idiot.”

“To each their own.” Ravage’s shoulders lift in a shrug, and he gives Megatron a piercing look. “Notice how you didn’t comment on Ratchet.”

Megatron grinds his denta. He toys with the energon again, staring at mid-grade which no longer carries the taint of Fool’s Energon, because Ratchet had come clean about that particular lie as well.

“You suggest I make use of his guilt,” Megatron says.

“Why not?” Ravage cocks an orbital ridge and his talons go clack-clack on the polished floor. “He’s only an Autobot. It’s not as though you have genuine feelings for him. For any of them.”

Megatron thins his lips. It would be so much easier to give in to the rage, to let himself soak in the disappointment and the anger and the betrayal. He could scream about his rightness as he destroyed everything around him, until he emerged from the rubble and death with nothing to show for his pain.

It would be easier.

If he didn’t care so fragging much.

He fiddles with the cube again.

“I’ll decide what to do about Ratchet,” Megatron says, at length, because the choice hovers in front of him, colliding with the reality of the situation, and the cage they’ve made for him. “It remains to be seen what he’s worth.”

Ravage snorts. “As you say.”

He’s gone between one vent and the next. Unsurprisingly.

Megatron is left to stare at the wall, lost in contemplation. He's more than aware he has a choice to make.

For better or worse.

Chapter 3

His berth is too large.

There was a time it had been the perfect size. It had been formatted to fit him and him alone, and Ratchet recharged on it without any issues whatsoever.

Recharging alone is another matter. His berth is too large, too empty, and a bit chilly, no matter how he adjusts the thermostat. He turns over and reaches for a frame that isn't there. It's ridiculous, because it's not as though he and Megatron shared a berth every night.

He misses Megatron.

Which is also ridiculous because he sees Megatron every day. In orbit. In passing. Words exchanged in the corridor, cordial and distant, with Ratchet refusing to push, and Megatron maintaining a chilly distance. Their conversations, if they have any, are brief.

Ratchet is fine. He's absolutely fine. He's choking on his guilt and trapped in a holding pattern, waiting for the final word from Megatron, but he's fine.

He doesn't know why he's waiting. He's quite sure the answer is right there in front of him. They're over. They're done. There is nothing left to say.

He still wouldn't change the choice he made.

Ratchet is no fool. He's heard the reprimands, the chastisement. Logically, he knows he made the selfish choice. He knows he's the architect of his own guilt and shame. He knows, to the core of his being, that he betrayed Megatron.

He would still choose to save Megatron's spark. He wishes he is a good enough mech to say he'd better bow to Megatron's personal wishes, but not in this instance. Not in this situation. He can't say it.

He's betraying himself to admit as much. He's a traitor to his spark, he reasons. Whether it's himself or the Autobots or Megatron, he's a mech who can't be trusted apparently.

It's better this way.

Better all around.

~

Ultra Magnus would have rathered Megatron stay off duty until he's reached an equilibrium, but he can hardly deny a mech who's been caged so much already. The haunted cast to Megatron's optics stays his glossa.

At best, he shortens Megatron's shifts, gives him the quieter ones. Megatron must notice, but he says nothing, which is an admission of his own fatigue without so many words.

Fatigue cloaks Megatron like a secondary layer. His vents labor with quiet click-clicks Ultra Magnus wants to urge him to let a medic investigate. His armor draws tight to his protoform. He speaks slowly, deliberately, as though careful not to let his words slur.

Ultra Magnus does not mention Ratchet around Megatron. He may not be as... familiar with personal interactions and relationships, but even he is not so foolish as to be unable to recognize a delicate subject. Their relationship has clearly taken a heavy blow, perhaps to its end, and Ultra Magnus has yet to decide if such is a good thing.

They are -- were -- good for each other. The situation was and is still complicated. Megatron's feelings of betrayal are warranted. Ratchet's desire to keep his lover alive is also understandable.

This is why Ultra Magnus does not arrange himself in something so messy as a relationship. It's too compromising.

It's such a bother.

"I swear," Rodimus groans as he sulks onto the bridge to take shift over from Ultra Magnus, "If those two don't get their act together, I'm going to lock them in a closet until they talk their slag out. They're bringing down the atmosphere of the whole ship."

"Locking them in a room together will not produce the results you seek," Ultra Magnus tells him with a severe frown. "Time and distance are needed. You cannot push them, Rodimus."

Rodimus rolls his optics and chuffs a vent -- something he learned from Chromedome, Ultra Magnus is sure. "Mechs need to be pushed sometimes. Especially those two."

"I am surprised you are encouraging this."

Rodimus looks up at him and winks. "Why wouldn't I be? War's over, right? If you ask me, the best way to put a leash on Megatron is to put an actual *leash* on Megatron." He waggles his optical ridges.

Primus save him.

Ultra Magnus swallows a sigh and resists the urge to rub his temples. It only encourages him. "Enjoy your shift, Rodimus."

His Prime grins and does a little dance in place. "Go relax, Mags. That's an order."

"You keep saying that as if it is actually going to work," Ultra Magnus says, and he dismisses himself from the bridge.

It is too early to take a rest, which is fine, because Ultra Magnus doesn't intend to immediately retire. He's not going to relax, despite Rodimus' orders. He seeks out Megatron instead, and is unsurprised to find the former warlord tucked away in his habsuite.

Megatron used to roam the halls of the Lost Light. Or he could be found on some of the observation platforms or the research center. However, since his recent troubles began, it is rare to find him anywhere but his habsuite.

He is not much for attempting socialization these days. This concerns Ultra Magnus, not only for the sake of Megatron's mental health, but for the sake of the progress he's made in becoming an Autobot and a member of the crew.

He pings for entry. He wouldn't be surprised if Megatron ignores him, and is pleasantly relieved when the door opens, and Megatron treats him to something approximating a welcome look.

"Is something wrong?" Megatron asks.

"No. I wanted to see how you fare," Ultra Magnus says with a tilt of his head in greeting. "Have you been recharging well?"

Megatron snorts and steps back into his habsuite, which Magnus takes as an invitation to enter. "Is that a rhetorical question?"

"No, but apparently it is a foolish one. Have you asked First Aid for assistance?" Ultra Magnus asks.

"Again. Rhetorical."

Ultra Magnus cycles a ventilation. "I am concerned for your well-being, and I assure you, my concern is genuine."

"I know it is. I still don't trust it." Megatron gives him a long, measured look. His face is a careful mask. Guarded.

"If there's anything I can do--"

"There isn't."

It's frustrating. Understandable, but frustrating.

"Very well." Ultra Magnus backs toward the door, makes to leave, but pauses. The guilt lingers -- for not putting his foot down, for not speaking louder, for insisting on behalf of Megatron. "If you wish to speak to someone, I will be happy to listen. I know how to keep a secret." '

The corner of Megatron's lips curl into a half-smile. "Yes, you do, don't you, Minimus Ambus." He relaxes by a small degree. "Thank you for the offer. I'll keep it in mind."

It's a victory, however small. It's progress, and so Ultra Magnus calls it a win. He offers Megatron a tilt of his head -- acknowledgment -- before he takes his leave. Respecting Megatron's space is paramount to regaining Megatron's trust.

Ultra Magnus no more wants to see Megatron return to the rampaging warlord he'd been than anyone else on the ship. Megatron deserves the courtesy.

Now.

If only he could get Ratchet's head out of his aft, perhaps things might move along more smoothly. But everything in stages, step by step, Ultra Magnus supposes.

There are some problems he isn't meant to solve.

~

“You’re not recharging.”

“I recharge.”

“Not enough, according to this data,” First Aid replies, drawing upon decades of experience watching Ratchet, standing firm in the face of soldiers bigger and stronger and more stubborn. Megatron is perhaps the epitome of all three descriptors. “You’re not recovering. You’re in danger of activating another glitch.”

Megatron’s lips press into a thin line. His optics narrow. “I was under the assumption the glitch was fixed,” he says, and his mouth forms a sneer, hatred and fear mingling together in the flash of his field. “Was that not the intention of the... surgical process?”

He can’t form the word pneurosurgery. First Aid can’t blame him.

“The surgery corrected the existing glitch, but does not prevent new ones,” First Aid explains, drawing carefully upon his patience. “What we’re dealing with here is not a one-time occurrence, but something that’s likely to repeat itself in the future.”

A growl rises in Megatron’s chassis. “Explain.”

First Aid swallows a sigh. He’s been trying to explain this for days, but Megatron has been doing a fantastic job of avoiding the medical bay and necessary check-ups.

“Recharge purges aren’t uncommon,” First Aid begins, picking his words carefully, because there is a lot of ground to cover. How to explain to a former warlord that the war itself is part of the cause, that peace is partially to blame?

“We all suffer from them. We all have... trauma and pain we’re trying to forget. Things we push down that come back when we’re vulnerable. During the war, it was easier to deal with because we hid it for self-preservation. Now that we have a time of peace, our processors are reminding us of everything we pushed aside, usually in the form of those purges.”

Megatron frowns. “You’re telling me that everyone has to suffer pneurosurgery at some point?”

First Aid resists the urge to rub his forehead, a preliminary to the ache about to develop. “No. In most cases, mechs manage to work through the purges on their own. Rarely does it result in a purge-loop glitch, and rarer still are the mech’s firewalls so powerful they resist the intervention of a trained medic.”

Ratchet would have been able to pull Megatron from the purge-loop if not for his firewalls. Whether Megatron had constructed those on his own, or they’d been designed by Shockwave, no one knew. They’d probably never know. Megatron has been rebuilt so many times, it’s impossible to pinpoint where any coding glitch formed.

“I’m just unlucky then.” Megatron’s sneer is somehow both self-directed and aimed at First Aid, or

perhaps Autobots in general.

“Some might say you’re lucky,” First Aid says, watching Megatron carefully, to see his reaction to this. “Your spark felt you were safe enough and ready to start dealing with everything you’ve pushed aside.”

At least he would be, if this wasn’t Megatron, whose reaction to pain is to keep pushing it down, ignoring it, and pretending everything is all right, because only those who are weak suffer, and Megatron is not weak.

Megatron’s jaw twists. “How do we make it stop?”

“A conversation with Rung would probably help,” First Aid says.

“No. Another option.”

First Aid fiddles with a datapad. “I can give you a sedative to help you recharge, but it’s not going to solve the problem.”

“The problem,” Megatron echoes, and his tone is flat and disbelieving. “You suggest I am ill. I have a sickness. A weakness. Something which must be excised.”

First Aid’s fingers twitch, and he resists the urge to rub at his forehead. “I’m saying that we’re all soldiers in peace-time, and we don’t know what to do with that anymore.”

Megatron frowns. His optics narrow. He looks away, audibly vents, and First Aid hears the click-click of a manual systems reset. Megatron’s field is a simmering presence beneath the surface, a volcano threatening to erupt. He’s an emotional mess, and First Aid never thought he’d find himself feeling sympathetic toward Megatron.

Yet, here he is. Concerned and sympathetic.

Physical pain is so much easier to bear than emotional and mental turmoil. How it must pain Megatron, to fight against something that doesn’t have physical shape. Something he can’t rip into, or blast away, or shoot.

Ironically, in any other situation, his relationship with Ratchet would be a stabilizing factor he could sorely use right now.

“So I am left to suffer,” Megatron says, and there’s a way he says the words, like he’s speaking around a sour taste on his glossa. “How appropriate. A new way has been found to punish me. How clever you Autobots are.”

“The mneumosurgery didn’t cause this,” First Aid says, repeats, feels like he’s been down this road before, but fear is an irrational beast. Fear is quick to blame, desperate to blame in order to regain some measure of control.

Megatron’s optics narrow. “I have no way of knowing, do I?”

First Aid activates his vocalizer, then goes silent. There is no point repudiating something when Megatron has no interest in listening to reason, and honestly, Megatron is right. First Aid has no way to prove Megatron’s current symptoms aren’t because of the mneumosurgery, especially since

truthfully, they are in part.

The mneumosurgery did not cause Megatron's purges, his glitches, the stress reactions. But as a mech who fears the process, who loathes the idea of being invaded in such a manner, the mneumosurgery certainly hasn't helped.

"There are solutions," First Aid says at length, careful to keep his tone light and helpful.

Megatron shoots him a derisive glance. "I'm sure there are." He stands, and First Aid holds himself still from the flinch the action threatens to cause. Megatron is very large, and when he's in a snit, that largeness is amplified.

For all that he's an "Autobot" and co-captain of the Lost Light, he is still a dangerous mech. First Aid has not forgotten what Megatron is capable of.

"I'm here, if you ever want to listen to them," First Aid says.

"I think I've had enough of an Autobot's help." Megatron sneers.

He's gone between one cycle and the next. First Aid cycles his optics and a ventilation. He rubs his forehead, tapping the fingers of his other hand over a datapad.

Primus.

~

For the third time in as many days, Megatron wakes from recharge gasping, his armor a clatter around him, his field a riotous whirl. He's cold, deep down inside, and he swears he can taste grit and grime. He has to cycle his optics more than a few times to see lights, and his ventilations are so rapid, it makes him light-headed.

He tumbles out of his berth, wobbles across the floor on knees which don't want to bear his weight. He braces himself on the wall near his door, panting, optics squeezed shut against the swirling room.

It was easier when it was the same purge, over and over. But apparently his torture has grown bored with the mines. It's moved on to other nightmares. Terminus dying and vanished. Trepan's devilish grin of glee and satisfaction. Himself in chains before an army of Autobots hungry for his death.

He dies, and he lives, and he perishes again. It's a nightmare based on truth and that's the worst of it, because he doesn't wake with relief at it being over. It's not a lie that haunts him in his recharge. It's a memory he has to live with.

How clever of them, to punish him in such a manner. Chromedome must have been delighted to leave this little trap in Megatron's memory core.

He's exhausted to his core.

A growl of anger rolls through Megatron's internals. He's exhausted, and he's furious, and he wants answers. Immediately.

He pushes off the wall and storms out of his quarters, thoughts flashing lightning quick through his processor, but reason slipping through his fingers. He doesn't believe First Aid. He doesn't think this is common or normal. Chromedome must have left some trigger, some program, in his coding.

They will remove it, or Megatron will tear this ship to pieces.

He stalks to the medbay, a riotous fury building and building within him. He storms into the front lobby, and skids to a halt when he realizes the mech on shift is neither First Aid nor Velocity, but Ratchet, who looks up at him, first with curiosity, then with guarded concern.

Megatron almost turns around and strides back out, save that the exhaustion clings to every line and cable within him. So he squares his shoulders, meets Ratchet's gaze directly.

"You will fix me," he says, leaving no room for argument. "You will remove whatever your torturer has put in my coding or I promise you will regret what's been done."

Ratchet stands, audibly cycling a ventilation. "Chromedome helped you. He didn't do anything else." He pauses, rubs his fingers over his forehead. "I know First Aid explained this already. Your current symptoms have nothing to do with the pneumomectomy. It's a psychological syndrome brought upon by acute stress."

"Stress," Megatron repeats, and his engine growls, his hands forming fists, his field slipping out of his control. "Weakness, you mean. I'm not strong enough to handle the situation, that is what you are telling me, rather than admitting what you've had done to me."

Ratchet throws up his hands and comes out from behind the desk, prompting Megatron to slide a step backward, and Ratchet to stop mid-stride.

"I didn't say weakness," Ratchet hisses, and irritation flashes in his optics, before he reels it in, draws back, like he's trying to dial himself down. "It's years and years of war and pain and death. It's never dealing with our problems because we're too busy trying to stay alive. It's never facing the things that led to our war because we didn't have time, but now we do, so it's coming back to bite us in the aft."

Megatron levels him with a look, a sneer. "Then it's my fault."

"It's all of our fault!" Ratchet snaps, and his field, too, is loose upon the room, rattling around them with a flash of grief and irritation and worry. "You think you're the only one on this ship who has nightmares? Who suffers from purges? Who spends hours lying in the berth, thinking of the things they should have done, or the mechs who died, or the lives they could have saved? You ever wonder why Swerve's does such a brisk business?"

"One needn't wonder when it's obvious," Megatron grits out. He's no fool. He's seen many a mech cope with war through multiple mechanisms. Overindulgence, yes. Stimulants and depressants, for certain. Interfacing and relationships and treating oneself as expendable?

He's witnessed all of it. He's never indulged himself, but he's witnessed it.

Ratchet huffs a ventilation. "Then why are you acting like it's a foreign concept to you? Because

you've never had to deal with it yourself?" He rakes a hand over his head, and for the first time, Megatron realizes he looks exhausted, too.

His face is drawn with fatigue, his optics dim and weary. His armor is drawn tight to his frame, dull as if improperly cared for. He looks old, like he hasn't in ages.

No. Megatron will not feel sorry for Ratchet. He won't.

"It did not begin until the so-called glitch," Megatron says. Or, to be fair, it had not begun in earnest until then. "What other conclusions should I draw?"

Ratchet's expression runs a gamut of emotion. "The glitch rose because you felt safe and comfortable. Your mind thought it was a good time to make you start dealing with your slag, but it wasn't, and you suffered a glitch instead." He waves a hand. "Don't believe me? Ask anyone else. First Aid. Hoist. Rung. Smokescreen. Frag, dial up Cybertron and find another expert. They'll tell you the same thing."

Safe. Comfortable. What nonsense.

"Or," Ratchet continues, "You could try listening to me and let me help, rather than deal with this on your own, since it's obviously not working."

Megatron snarls at him. "Help? You've already helped me once and look where it got me!" His voice is too loud, too angry, and he's struggling to dial it down. "You took my greatest fear and used it against me."

Ratchet flinches, and where Megatron expects him to argue, to puff up about how he'd made the right choice, and Megatron should be grateful, Ratchet doesn't. Instead, he deflates. His gaze falls. He sighs, long and low.

"Yes," Ratchet says, and his voice is striped in static. "I made a mistake. I chose selfishly. I can't take that action back, and I know I've lost your trust." He pauses, works his jaw, and something in him strengthens as he lifts his gaze again. "I'll call someone else to help you. I don't need a scan to tell you're suffering, and you need care, if not from me, than someone else."

Megatron cycles his optics. He is ready to argue, but there is something.

Something in Ratchet's words or his tone or the distant flutters of a field now under control. Something in the way Ratchet looks at him, how he deflates like a foe defeated.

Ratchet had betrayed him. This is an unalterable truth. He'd chosen poorly, when it came to Megatron's care, going against his wishes to save Megatron's spark. His life.

Ratchet. The Autobot CMO. One of Optimus Prime's closest friends. A mech who had, on many occasions, claimed to despise Megatron and wish him dead.

It would have been easier, wouldn't it, for the Autobots to let him die. He could have crumbled to pieces under the glitch and no one would have blamed them. It would have been logical, reasonable, agreeable even, for Megatron's end to find him in such a manner. It solves the little problem of whether or not they should execute Megatron.

It would have solved a lot of problems.

Ratchet, however, had chosen otherwise.

He'd chosen, selfishly, for himself, because he wanted Megatron to live. Because he cares. Because Ratchet, on a personal level, wants Megatron to stay alive. He hadn't wanted to lose Megatron.

A bit of helpless laughter burbles up in Megatron's intake before he swallows it down and gives himself away.

The very mech who should have walked away and done the Autobots a great service by letting Megatron die, had instead thrown away his own principles to keep Megatron alive.

Primus, how had he not seen this sooner?

Megatron's spark throbs in his chassis, but for an entirely different reason. He sinks back another step, not to retreat, but to blindly grasp for one of the chairs in the lobby. He'd prefer the privacy of an office, but this late, he doubts they'll be disturbed.

"What are my options?" Megatron says, knowing he's let the silence drag too long, by the confusion on Ratchet's face, but his thoughts twirling around too fast with his sudden revelation.

Ratchet cares for him. About him. Against all odds.

Ratchet cycles his optics, and confusion flickers across his face. "I can call First Aid, though Rung might be best. There's also--"

"No," Megatron says, interrupting him with a shake of his head. "What are my treatment options? How do I fix this?"

"Fix?" Ratchet echoes, and he shakes his head, confusion still prevalent in his field. "This isn't a cracked optic or a broken strut. It can't be fixed overnight. It's going to take time. Rest. Conversations, even, with a qualified therapist."

Like Rung, Megatron imagines, just as First Aid said.

Megatron huffs a vent. It's not so much that he doesn't like Rung, but that he doesn't want to be psychoanalyzed. Sometimes a gun is just a gun. He doesn't want Rung picking apart every decision he's made, trying to find a deeper meaning to it. Neither does he want to break his spark open and spill out his pains to the mech.

He doesn't trust Rung.

"Or there's Smokescreen," Ratchet continues, a bit distant, like he's reading from a list. "He's not officially accredited, and he's never worked in an official capacity, but he's good at what he does. First Aid is qualified for basic therapy as well."

Megatron takes a breath. "What about you?"

Ratchet's gaze jerks toward him, disbelief shimmering in his optics. He squirms for a moment before he seems to gather himself. "There's a certain degree of trust involved. I no longer qualify."

Yes. There is that.

It weighs on Megatron still. The anger simmers beneath the surface. He looks at Ratchet and wants to shout, as much as he desperately wants to shake Ratchet, shake out the truth. He feels the touch of the needles still.

He remembers too keenly how he felt in Ratchet's arms. How his spark still yearns for the medic and the pleasure their relationship had given him.

"I let you bind me," Megatron says, and it's hard to ventilate, but he forces the words out regardless, quiet as they are. "I let you command me. I allowed you control over me, however measured the circumstances were. I let you see me weak."

He lifts his gaze, expecting to see Ratchet sharing his shame with the floor, but Ratchet meets his optics instead. He's not as much a coward as Megatron thought him to be.

"That was a gift you took advantage of. I can't easily forget what you did. But." Megatron pauses, cycles a ventilation, tangles his fingers together as he leans forward on his knees. "But I do recognize it was not done out of malice. So rather than burn the bridge to the ground, I'm willing to try rebuilding it."

Silence.

Ratchet's mouth opens, closes, opens again. He rubs his face and leans back against the desk. "Just to be clear, are you saying you don't want to end our relationship?"

"I'm saying I'm too invested to train another Autobot," Megatron says, provoking a sharp bark of laughter from the medic.

Ratchet hides behind his palm, but it's not enough to hide the half-smile curving his lips. "I honestly don't know what to say."

"That would be a first."

Ratchet snorts and lowers his hand, bracing them against the edge of the desk. "Yes, it would."

"We can't pick up where we left off," Megatron informs him, because he won't have Ratchet thinking all is forgiven, and he's free to continue as they were before. "I'm still furious, and you no longer have my trust."

To his credit, Ratchet doesn't flinch. "That's fair." He audibly cycles a ventilation, briefly shuttering his optics before opening them again. "Small steps. Very small steps." He pushes off from the desk and moves to rummage behind it, pulling something from a cabinet before emerging again. "You're having trouble recharging. Don't lie and tell me you aren't. This is a mild sedative. It won't put you out completely, but it will help you fall into recharge easier."

He offers the sedative.

Megatron works his jaw for several long moments before he takes it. A tentative trust, he decides, as he tucks the chip into a panel for later use.

"Thank you," Megatron says, and stands. Indecision grips him, as he looks into Ratchet's face, and misses the comfort he'd found with Ratchet like a desperate need unlike any he'd felt in a long,

long time. "If you're so inclined, after your shift, come see me in my hab."

Ratchet blinks at him, startled, but offers a brief nod. "I will."

"Good."

Megatron hesitates, but both he and Ratchet are guarded once more, which is probably for the best. So he leaves, back to his habsuite, back to his solitude, where he can ventilate with ease and hope he hasn't made a terrible mistake.

~

Concentration is beyond his grasp.

Long after Megatron's left. Long into the night, as Ratchet sits at his desk, one sensor primed to the door in case someone should need a medic, his thoughts spin and careen and collide into one another.

It's not forgiveness, but it's a chance. He only has to reach out and take it. Respect it.

It's more than he deserves and then some. He'd been prepared to accept the end of their relationship. He's not sure he's prepared for the long, hard battle before them. Rebuilding is much harder the second time around.

It's worth it.

However unexpected, it's worth it.

Velocity comes to relieve him, fighting off a yawn, cupping warmed, sweet energon as is her usual routine. She gives him a piercing look -- too perceptive this one is -- but she must decide it's none of her business because she doesn't ask.

"Quiet night?"

"The quietest," Ratchet says with a grunt. "Good luck."

"You, too," Velocity says, and if there's an edge of amusement to her voice, Ratchet chooses to ignore it.

He doesn't rush out of the medbay, but it's a near thing. He's as excited as he is apprehensive, enough to wonder if Megatron might have changed his mind in the hours since they spoke. Then he chastises himself for it.

This is Megatron, for Primus' sake. Ratchet shouldn't be so eager to find his way to Megatron's habsuite. He shouldn't be relieved for a glimpse of forgiveness from the mech. It's ridiculous.

He finds himself outside of Megatron's habsuite anyway. His hands are steady, because Ratchet's hands are always steady, though inside he's perhaps not quite so steady. But he is not a coward so he pings the door and waits, half-hoping Megatron has allowed the use of the sedative, and half-

hoping he hasn't.

He isn't sure which he wants more, and both indicate a measure of trust.

The door opens and Ratchet schools his expression into something more guarded than blatantly relieved. "You aren't recharging," he observes quietly.

"Not yet," Megatron says, and steps aside, gesturing for Ratchet to enter.

This time, the invitation is more blatant.

"Were you waiting for me?" Ratchet asks.

"It would have been rude not to."

Ratchet's spark flutters. The door closes behind him, and Megatron sits on the edge of the berth, looking at Ratchet expectantly. His hands are loosely clasped, his elbows braced on his thighs. His expression is as guarded as Ratchet's own.

Ratchet works his intake. Here, in the quiet and dim of Megatron's habsuite, the intimacy is not lost on him. It feels different than earlier, than the medical bay. Somehow, the guilt is heavier. Somehow, it feels a lot more like shame.

"I'm sorry," Ratchet says, and the words feel foreign on his glossa. He has to force them out, past decades and decades of relying on his own arrogance to help him keep putting one foot in front of the other.

"I know." Megatron tilts his head. "But you're also not sorry."

Ratchet doesn't let himself flinch. "You're alive. And I may be selfish for wanting that, but I'm not sorry for it."

Megatron snorts something that might be a laugh, if Ratchet were being generous. "No, you wouldn't be. Because you love me."

Frag it all to the Pit.

Ratchet folds his arms, heat soaking into face before he can stop it, and he's unable to keep Megatron's gaze. "I guess if that's the only word there is for it."

Megatron laughs, outright laughs at this, and it's such a warm sound, Ratchet's spark dances in his chassis. "It's an acceptable one." The berth creaks as he shifts on it. "Recharge with me, medic. There's a bridge to be built."

"You're unexpectedly forgiving," Ratchet says. He doesn't move, not just yet, but he looks up to see Megatron has indeed made room for him on the berth, though it's smaller than the one in Ratchet's habsuite.

Megatron tilts his head, crimson optics glittering at Ratchet from the dim. "Think about it, and perhaps a reason why will come to you."

Ratchet can think of one, but he doesn't want to presume. He lets his action speak for itself, finally

closing the distance to join Megatron on the berth, tasting the fatigue in Megatron's field the moment they make contact. He feels as though he hasn't had a solid recharge since that night.

Ratchet's spark aches with sympathy.

He rests a hand on Megatron's chest, over his badge, feels the former warlord tense beneath him, his gaze landing on Ratchet's hand before rising to his face.

"Just recharge," Ratchet says. "To start."

Megatron nods. "To start."

It's not too late. Ratchet takes comfort from that, and from the way Megatron curls into him, allows Ratchet to curl around him, and the gradual way he leans into Ratchet's touch. How he relaxes, inch by precious inch, until the soft ventilations indicate recharge.

It's a start.

End Notes

Feedback is absolutely welcome and appreciated.

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